

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT IRRADIATED MAIL

The following questions focus on handling irradiated mail from a records management point of view. The U.S. Postal Service and the General Services Administration provide mail management information relating to irradiated mail on their web sites.

How can I tell if my agency receives irradiated mail?

The U. S. Postal Service has announced that it is irradiating the following types of mail with postage stamps that are addressed to specific Government offices in Zip Codes 20200 through 20599:

- First class business and letter-size envelopes and flats
- Express and Priority mail
- Other packages.

Mail with postage meter strips and mail that is insured, registered, or certified are not irradiated.

Currently all mail directed to the White House, Congress, and the Library of Congress is being irradiated.

Evidence of irradiation includes weakened or discolored (yellowed) envelopes, visibility of adhesive through the paper, and transfer of inks.

How does irradiation affect mail?

In the process of irradiation, mail is exposed to extreme heat. Paper is weakened and may appear to have been aged, with discoloration (e.g., yellowing), and brittleness. Pages may break, crumble, or fuse to other pages. Documents bound with glue may have loose pages. The printing on pages may be distorted or offset onto adjacent pages. If tape is affixed to address labels, the address may be illegible.

Materials other than paper may also be affected. Plastics and inks may melt and fuse. Irradiation can affect such enclosures as photographic films, transparencies, and prints; compact disks,

audio cassettes, and electronic, digital, and magnetic media; compact disk jewel cases; and credit cards.

What are the records management concerns with irradiated mail?

The contents of irradiated mail may be needed to conduct agency business and thereafter maintained in agency files for a period of time until their scheduled disposition. If the information is illegible, it will not be available to the agency. If the documents are so dry that they crumble or break apart, they will not last as long as the other contents of the file.

Do I need to keep irradiated records even if they are clearly damaged?

As with records damaged by fire or water, you should assess the condition of irradiated records and, if possible, recover the information. If the documents are legible, you need to decide whether they need to be copied to ensure that they will remain legible and usable under normal handling for the time period they are needed by the agency, as specified in the records schedule. If the records are only partly legible or illegible, you may need to determine how to acquire replacement copies, such as asking the sender to resubmit using a transmission method other than the U.S. mail.

How long will irradiated records last?

NARA does not know how long irradiated records will last, though the usable life of such materials has likely been considerably reduced by exposure to the irradiation and high temperatures.

Can the records be re-hydrated to restore their original strength?

Once the fibers have been weakened by high heat, re-hydration cannot restore strength. Even if such action would be effective, it would be more economical to copy the records.

If I decide to copy the records, do I need NARA approval before discarding the damaged originals?

No. NARA approval is not needed to discard damaged original Federal records; exact duplicates are an acceptable replacement for damaged temporary and permanent Federal records.

If I determine that the original irradiated records are adequate for agency needs, and the records are scheduled for transfer to the National Archives of the United States, will NARA accept them?

The agency must ensure that the records are legible and intact for the period of time they remain in agency custody, including off-site storage. When permanent records are transferred to the National Archives of the United States, NARA will take appropriate preservation measures to ensure their continued availability. The agency should notify NARA at the time of transfer if the records have been irradiated.

Where can I get additional information?

Information on records management assistance from NARA is available on its web site at <http://www.nara.gov/records/faqs/assist.html>.

GSA has posted information on irradiated mail on its web site at http://www.gsa.gov/Portal/content/orgs_content.jsp?contentOID=22920&contentType=1005&PMTM=1.

Technical information on the effects of radiation is available on the Smithsonian Institution web site at http://www.si.edu/scmre/mail_irradiation.html and http://www.si.edu/scmre/irradiate_exam.html.